

MANAGEMENT: TOWARDS A UNIFIED FIELD THEORY

Neal Pollock

Leadership and the One Minute Manager. By Kenneth Blanchard, Patricia Zigarmi, and Drea Zigarmi. William Morrow & Co., New York, 1985.

Executive Leadership. Elliot Jaques. Cason Hall, Arlington, VA, 1991.

Requisite Organization. Elliot Jaques. Cason Hall, Arlington, VA, 1989, (2nd ed. 1996).

This article is a "theme" review of three books written by management theorists of high repute. (It follows in the footsteps of a piece published here 4 years ago [Frisch, 1995].) These authors approach management from very different perspectives. But to quote Frisch, "Unfortunately, every conceptualization and interpretation needed to arrive at a theory represents the point of view or, more generally, the value system of the observer, and objectivity is just an illusion. The same 'facts' can have different meanings for different people; and even the same people may view the facts differently depending on the time and situation" (Frisch, 1995).

Fads in management seem as common as those in fashion. Their short life cycles may, however, be attributed not only to deficiencies in logic or implementation, but to the lack of a unified theory of management. Systems engineering teaches us that optimizing the whole de-optimizes the parts, and optimizing the parts de-optimizes the whole. Similarly, reengineering seems to indicate that some processes need to be replaced by

revolution rather than updated by evolution. Perhaps a piecemeal approach prevents many interventions from reaching the required critical mass. Focusing on leadership, management, or supervision, and disregarding the other levels of abstraction or resolution, may be at the core of the difficulty.

Both authors attempt to expand initial, breakthrough concepts into management systems and to address, it seems, the

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essence of management. The two systems are qualitatively diverse to say the least. Nevertheless, they are not antithetical.

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Blanchard developed “situational leadership” (and version II) some time ago. It was offered by the Navy in Crystal City until the Base Realignment and Closure Act moved much of the personnel out of Northern Virginia. In fact, they also offered his “leadership bridge” (Good, Hill, and Blanchard, 1992) which combined “situational leadership II” with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Briggs-Myers and McCaulley, 1985). Of course, his most well-known work centered upon *The One Minute Manager* (Blanchard, 1991). In the present volume, he and his co-authors have combined situational leadership “II” with one-minute

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management. Perhaps his next endeavor will combine all three into one unified approach to management. It seems to me that the two components of the present volume dovetail quite well. I will not elucidate the principles of one-minute management here since, I believe, they have entered the mainstream of management practice; they center on concise and timely feedback (both positive and negative) between a manager and a subordinate.

Situational leadership II, however, is a much more complex and far-reaching

theory. The heart of it lies in the obvious observation that people differ. The extension to the Myers-Briggs is, thus, a very logical one. The latter is a model of 16 types of preferences to which each person belongs.

But Blanchard is not plumping for the nature versus nurture polarity. Rather, he elucidates that competence is a function of nature, nurture, and attitudinal factors, as applied to a task. Thus, for instance, a concert pianist requires not only natural talent and quality training, but also desire, drive, and confidence in order to succeed. This is a refreshing departure from the linear (let alone binary) assumptions of others, in practice if not in theory. Thus, Blanchard endows his model with four developmental levels (D1 through D4). His is a nonlinear formulation despite the appearance of linearity in these levels (see Figure 1). It then follows that persons at each developmental level require different treatment by their managers.

I use the term “managers” for simplicity. Many organizations (but not Jaques) would call them supervisors. Some have said that managers manage things not people, implying that superiors are supervisors, not managers. This is nonsense. An organization can *only* manage people. Machines (at present) cannot think, and thus cannot be managed. Furthermore, people primarily operate mentally. Organizations operate through their people. They can only operate with or upon things.

For our purposes, people are not things. Any student of social psychology should know that the subjects of their experiments cannot be apprised of the nature of the experiment without destroying its validity. People do not behave as automatons.

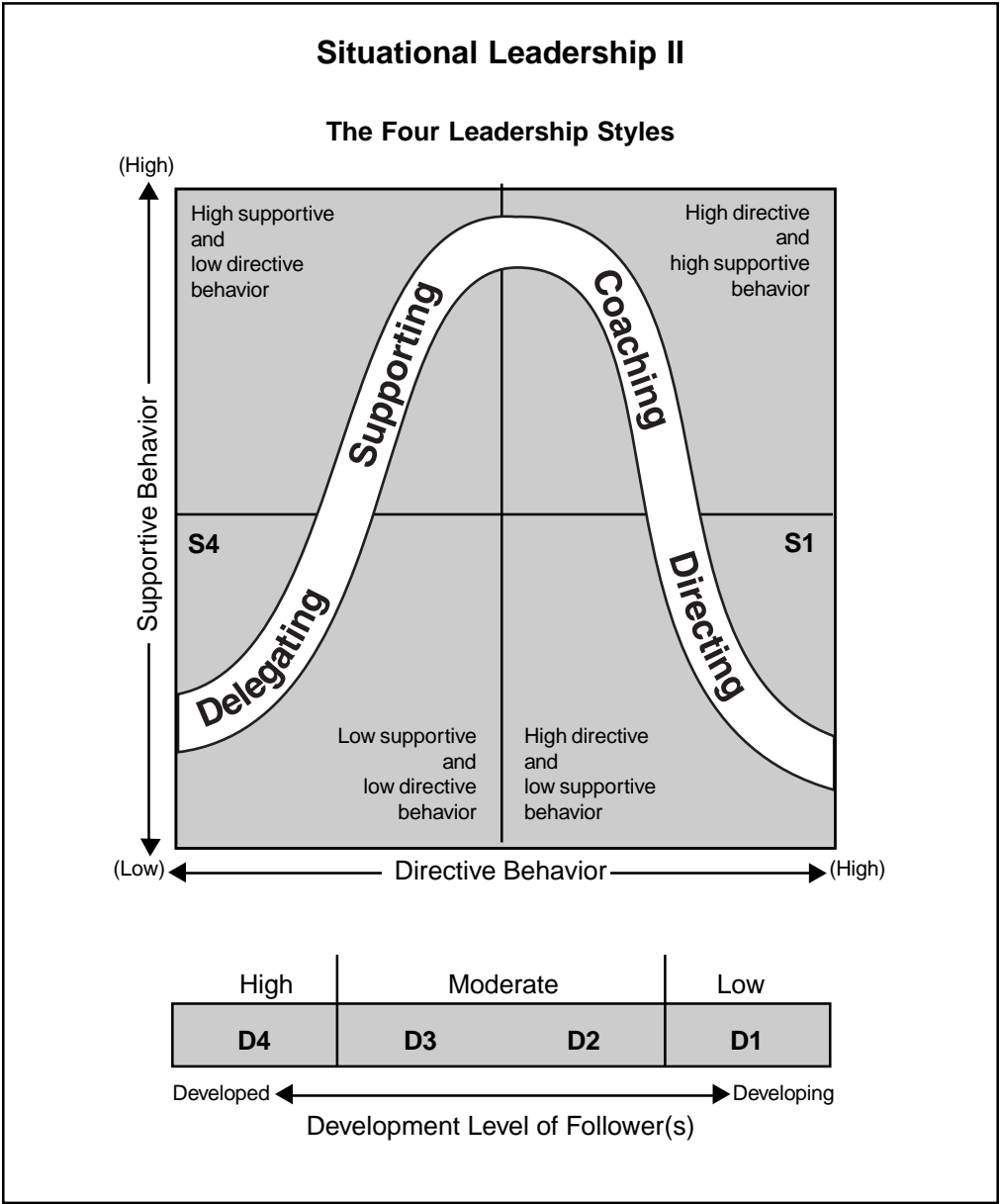


Figure 1. Blanchard's Management Model

Indeed, the researches of Freud and Jung have adequately demonstrated the existence of human nonrationality and, sometimes, irrationality—for those who have not noticed this themselves. There are

precious few (if any) Commander Spocks or Commander Datas in this world. Notably, neither one was human; it is doubtful they would have been as endearing if they had been depicted as such.

SUPPORT AND DIRECTION

The two types of treatment devised by Blanchard are *support* and *direction*. These form a two-by-two matrix with each being high and low. The odd thing is that D1 requires only direction, D3 requires only support, D2 requires both, and D4 requires neither. It seems logical that direction would fall as a worker becomes more experienced. It is not, however, intuitive that support needs would go up, then down. But if one were to map “direction” onto the physical world as a linear process (which *seems* right) but map “support” onto the psychological world (wherein all human traits are normally distributed via the bell-shaped curve), the result would match Blanchard’s model to a “T.” Indeed, the “normal” or Gaussian

shape (see Figure 2) (Cascio, 1978, p. 81) of Blanchard’s curve is apparent in Figure 1.

Of course, Blanchard’s resulting four styles of management are labeled S1 through S4, to match the developmental levels (S1 being generally appropriate to D1, etc.). He does provide for emergency contingencies, though. This is reminiscent of other models that calculate one’s management style, but also predicate a backup style for emergencies.

Interestingly, the authors do not address any personal propensities in this regard for those practicing situational leadership. As the Myers-Briggs practitioner would do, one is, apparently, to develop other operating modes than one’s natural, preferred one. Thus, it is assumed that the manager is proficient in the use of all four

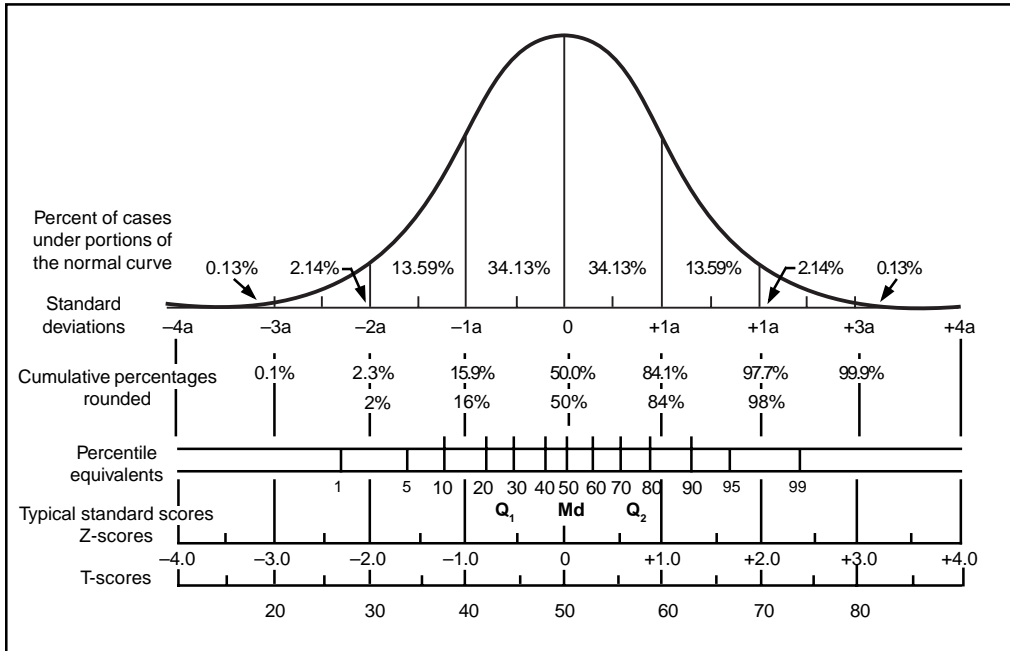


Figure 2. Normal or Gaussian Distribution

management styles. As is pithily stated, “there is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals” (Blanchard, 1985). Actually, Blanchard has merely elevated equality to a higher level of abstraction. Most paradoxes and enigmas are really confounded levels of abstraction. Similar to the systems engineering dictum cited above, what is true at one level of abstraction (or level of detail or level of resolution) is not true at all higher levels.

But Blanchard’s approach is eminently practical. The small volume itself is extremely readable. Its stepwise approach is gently convincing and disarming. His style demonstrates his stylistic recommendations; it’s a combination of coaching and counseling approaches to teaching. Indeed, it supports his multifaceted approach to people management: physical and psychological. In his own words, “Situational leadership is not something you do to people but something you do with people” (Blanchard, 1985). Such a low-key approach may make his techniques more palatable to a jaded workforce.

Nevertheless, as Pritchett points out in *High Velocity Culture Change* (Pritchett, 1993), organizational change requires a great deal of effort and commitment before it becomes institutionalized. When RADM John Ailes became Commander, Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command, he determined that his subordinate supervisory personnel required training in supervision. Despite the long-standing “requirement” that supervisors take five specific supervisory courses within a year of their appointment, precious few had completed the program and earned their “Supervisory Excellence Program” plaque.

RADM Ailes directed personnel to devise a short course and required *all* designated supervisors to take it, or he would remove them as supervisors. (Needless to say, we all took the course.) Since it was directed from above, the trainer asked, at the start of the course, what people thought about their being directed to take it. I still remember the response of one supervisor who said angrily, “I’ve been supervising for 30 years; I don’t need this!” A voice in my head said, “yes, you’ve been supervising poorly for 30 years and you wouldn’t want to change now!”

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Blanchard’s method of operation includes contracting for leadership style. For this to work, both supervisor and subordinate must understand situational leadership. In addition, they should agree on the developmental level and matching style appropriate to the task at hand. Competence is, in this schema, transitive. There are no competent people, only people competent at a particular task. The task is the object. The developmental level can only be defined in terms of a given task. Since the task of supervision must also comply with this proviso, supervisors within the organization would be mapped onto appropriate levels of development and (their superiors’) style.

TASKING TIME-SPAN

Jaques’s conception of development level is entirely different (see Figures 3 and 4). He claims that his empirical data

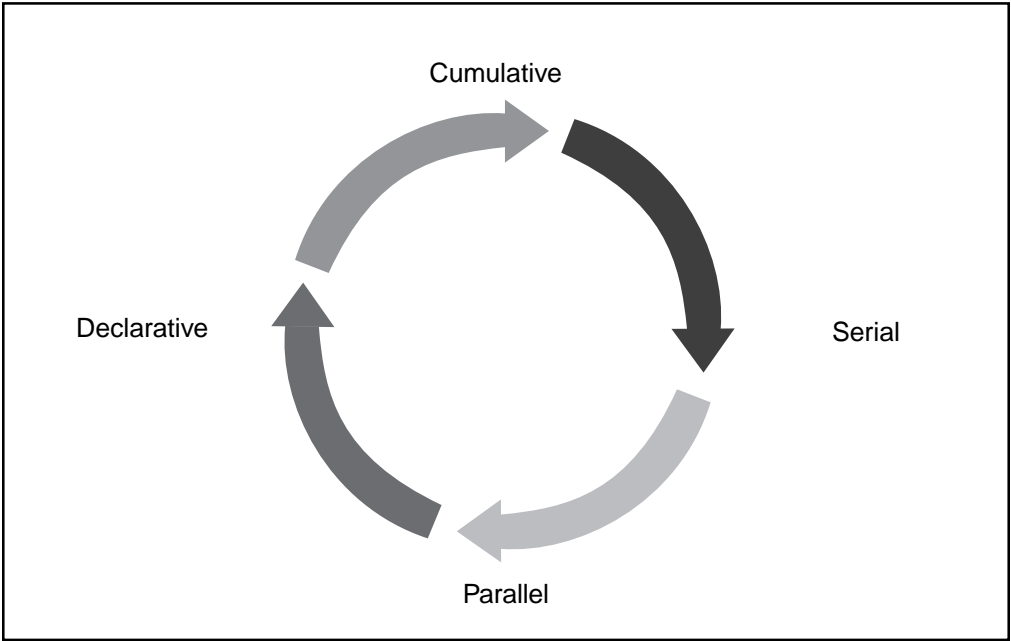


Figure 3. Jaques's Methods of Mental Processing

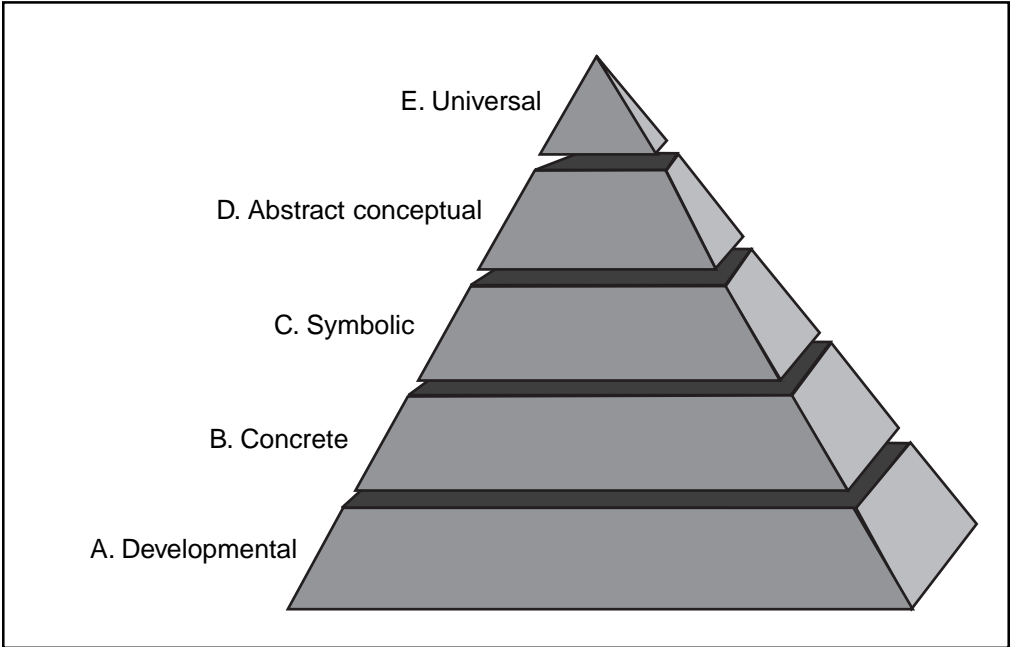


Figure 4. Jaques's Orders of Information Complexity

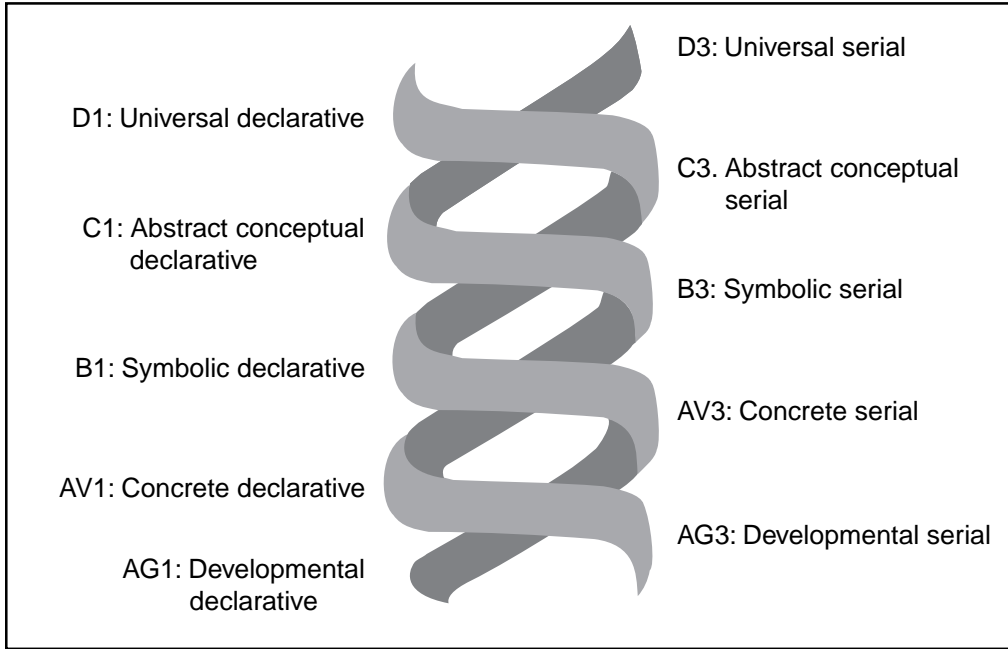


Figure 5. Cognitive Power

indicate that a person's maximum time-span of tasking determines his or her proper place in an organization. Indeed, he even correlates organizational rankings and (for a few selected countries) pay scales for these rankings. This time span or time horizon equals the maximum duration (from the very start to the very end) of one's longest task in a particular job. This is not a continuous scale, but has consistent break points (what we engineers call "knees on the curve"). Thus, he defines the optimal levels of an organization, not too vertical, not too horizontal, but naturally expressing human predilections for time slices. In another volume (*Time Span Handbook*, 1964) he provides specifics on how to determine the time-span of specific jobs.

To Jaques, competence involves matching an individual's time-span with a

particular job's time-span. As does Blanchard, he finds competence to be transitive (i.e., a function of the job or task at hand). His distribution of time-span-dependent organizational levels is likewise nonlinear. Indeed, he addresses heredity ("cognitive power"—see Figure 5), training, and task as elements of competence. This is analogous to Blanchard's transportable versus task skills.

Jaques's approach is quite cognitive in itself, seeming to display a Myers-Briggs propensity for the thinking function. Yet, later, in *Executive Leadership*, he does address the ramifications of the feeling function (MBTI "F") as well as the usefulness of intuition (MBTI "N") (Briggs-Myers and McCauley, 1985). Thus, he is more inclusive than would first appear. He seems to be trying to compensate for others' overemphasis on the value of

charisma. His emphasis is more upon organizational structure and dynamics rather than on individual personality differences, which cannot be relied upon over either time or the breadth of the organization.

He even makes the seemingly enigmatic point (*Executive Leadership*, p. 180) that “clearly bounded general responsibilities paradoxically release initiative and creativity because the boundaries are clear. Unclear boundaries and lack of adequate limits always stifle initiative because people do not know how far they can push new ideas” (Jaques, 1991). While I suspect that this might be limited to ± 2 or 3

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σ (standard deviations), it is part of a strong argument for the value of organizational structure not only for the attainment of organizational

goals, but also for the continued stability and health of its members. Jaques addresses the interdependence between workers and organizations as a long-term value.

Jaques’s longitudinal analyses of the depth of organizational talent (based upon the time-span potentials of company personnel) is most interesting. He has devised learning curves for time-span abilities such that he can project when specific individuals would be capable of assuming higher positions in the organization. While this might be difficult (if not impossible) to defend in court today, Jaques has certainly boldly gone where no one (to my knowledge) has gone

before. His analytical, scientific approach lends credence to the term “management science,” which otherwise seems a gross misnomer.

Nonetheless, he does not ignore the human factor, stating that “to be an effective managerial leader a person must really value the opportunity to work with subordinates and value being able to unleash their enthusiastic and effective collaboration” (1991, p. 72). To Jaques, there is no difference between a manager and a leader. It is difficult to imagine a true leader who didn’t need to manage or a true manager who didn’t need to lead. Such people (if they exist) are probably not in the mainstream of the industrial and governmental organizations with which we are mainly concerned.

NONLINEAR DEVELOPMENT

John D. Rockefeller said that “Good management consists of showing average people how to do the work of superior people” (Braude, 1961, p. 57). Perhaps such an approach includes the creation of an enabling organizational structure and work environment which place individuals in their appropriate level positions and addresses their future potentials. This is a major change from Peter Drucker’s observation that “Most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done” (Albrecht & Zenke, 1985).

Even with the benefit of management training at the Defense Acquisition University and despite numerous acquisition reform initiatives, there has been little progress toward a new management paradigm. We need a meta management plan

rather than just program management training. It would, of necessity, include both leadership and supervision under its purview. According to Alfred North Whitehead, “The art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order” (Braude, 1961, p. 311). The qualitative nature of that order, I would suggest, differs for evolutionary, gradual change versus revolutionary Kuhnian, paradigmatic change. Transitioning from a binary or even linear model to a nonlinear, multidimensional one is such a change.

An example is in order. Employees today (for instance, in the federal government), obtain increases over present salaries via three avenues: merit raises and bonuses, cost of living increases, and promotions. The first is based on past history, generally of the preceding work year and against preset task objectives. The second does not involve work performance. But the third, promotions, are the case in point. A supervisory position is often filled by the “best qualified” worker—possibly a former subordinate to this position. In analyzing the candidates, what criteria are used? Work performance. But at what level? At the worker or subordinate level. Thus, an organization may lose its best worker by promoting him or her into a supervisory post for which he or she may not be suited. Using Blanchard’s definition of competence, this is easily comprehended.

Jaques’s approach is even more dramatically opposed to such a promotion schema. He analyzes the cognitive complexity of the job versus the cognitive power of the person and looks for a match. Such a schema depends on each candidate’s future capabilities and

performance rather than his or her past capabilities and performance.

Interestingly, Lawrence J. Peter popularized his “Peter Principle” based on people being promoted into positions beyond their competence to their “level of incompetence” (Peter, 1970, 1972). However, the similarity to Blanchard and Jaques is ephemeral. Peter’s model was static. Once one reached one’s level of incompetence, one stayed there forever. Not so with Jaques, who actually provides curves based upon natural human growth in ability over time.

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He shows that one naturally grows from level to level; he’s much more optimistic than Peter. The growth is, however, gradual. It’s also reminiscent of program management learning curves.

Blanchard’s model implies a similar understanding in that competence to him depends on innate abilities and his situational leadership techniques for developing task competence are recognized to have limits. No one can be competent at everything. Indeed, some early studies on programmed learning demonstrated that the hard-core unemployed could not necessarily be educated to perform given work tasks even with the very best instruction and equipment.

However, despite some nonlinearities such as Blanchard’s normal (Gaussian)-shaped development curve and Jaques’s discontinuous time-span levels of work performance, both still appear to predicate linear personal work development. In

other words, a worker proceeds through each level to attain higher levels. This parallels Peter's approach, which assumed that all the positions beyond the first level of incompetence were also levels of incompetence. I think this implies an assumption of evolutionary development that is not always applicable.

Activation or arousal theory (Figure 6) uses a nonlinear model for human performance, similar in shape (normal distribution) to Blanchard's situational leadership curve. According to activation theory, an individual's performance has an optimum point (local maximum). Starting from the left, as stimulation (e.g., task demands upon the employee) increases (along the x-axis), output increases (along the y-axis). There is, it may be noted, a point at which the curve becomes nearly linear. But the slope becomes zero at the "characteristic point" (the local maximum—highest point of the curve). After that, the curve slopes downwards, again resembling a straight

line for a time, until it asymptotically approaches zero on the y-axis.

To the left of the "characteristic point," the employee is underutilized and, probably, bored. To the right of the "characteristic point," the employee is overutilized and, probably, overstressed. Output is nonoptimal under both these conditions. I would suggest that such a model could be applied not only to the quantity of work assigned, but also to the quality of work assigned. A person may have a lot of work to do, but if that work is well below the scope of the work of which that person is capable, that person will still be underutilized. Such a situation is analogous to Jaques's mismatch between a person's present time-span capability versus the time-span of his or her present work or position.

Another model may be illustrative of such a situation. The MBTI delineates 16 personal preference modes based upon Jungian psychology. Per Blanchard's

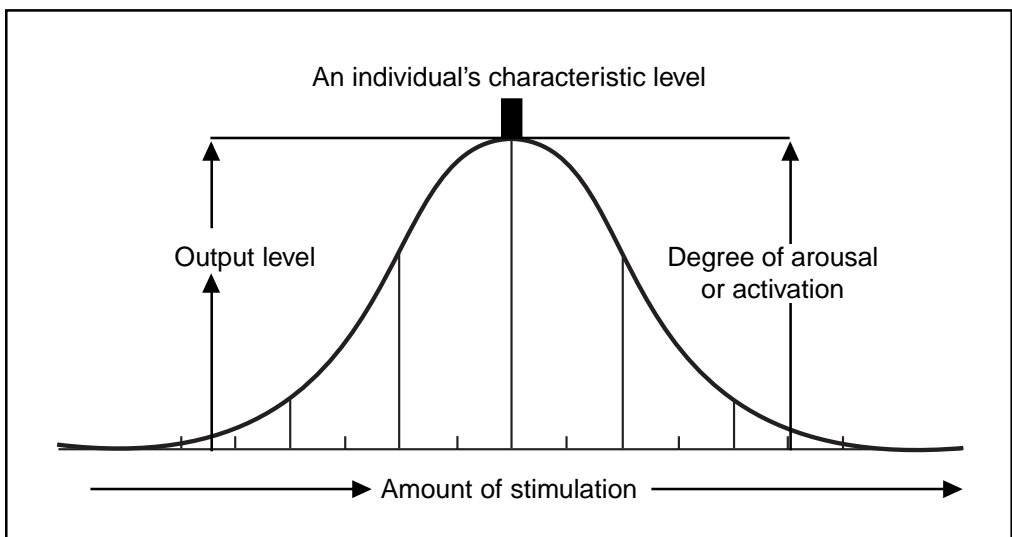


Figure 6. Activation or Arousal Theory

“leadership bridge” model, the Myers-Briggs can be correlated to work capabilities and performance as well as used in management and supervisory strategies. The Myers-Briggs is a nonlinear, nondevelopmental system, though it does indicate the possibility of consciously developing the ability for a person to operate in modes other than one’s natural (preferred) one.

In analyzing executive abilities, the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (Knowlton & McGee, 1996) determined that certain of the preferences (especially the N or “iNtuitive” function as opposed to the S, or *sensate*, function) were more conducive to such abilities and gathered statistics on the distributions of such preferences and characteristics among corporate, government, and student populations. Others have shown, not surprisingly, that certain occupations have a far from statistically average distribution of MBTI preferences.

I participated in a small study in the Navy in which the engineers were predominantly from two specific preferences (of the 16). The vast majority were ISTJ or ESTJ (either *introverted* or *extroverted*, *sensate*, *thinking*, and *judging*). In Blanchard’s leadership bridge (Good et al., 1992), SJs are called “preservers.” As with all of the categories, they have positive and negative characteristic tendencies (which an individual can either accept or overcome through personal effort). Since SJs tend to build on the past and focus on the present (see Kiersey & Bates, 1984), they may find it difficult to adapt to the present Defense Department emphasis on personnel empowerment, out-of-the-box creativity, acquisition reform, open systems, and nonlinear thinking.

Thus, while I certainly do not dispute either of our authors’ contentions that there is an appropriate level for each particular person on each particular task, I do question the implication that each individual must proceed linearly through and beyond each level of development or task from a job or position perspective (level of abstraction). This is akin to the

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situation in which a college may allow candidates to take placement examinations vice taking each and every prerequisite to higher learning. I do wonder, however, if perhaps, in identifying the levels in an entire corporation (with growth curves for present employees), Jaques has implied that he would hire personnel based upon their present and future growth curves as matched to the needs of the company—implying a nonlinear assignment based upon future performance and predicted growth. His extensive description of normal human development might merely be provided as the norm, without precluding deviations from that norm.

I would contend that there might very well be a correlation between Jaques’s cognitive processes and developmental levels and the MBTI. His charts of developmental levels, for instance, take age into account such that two individuals might be at the same level despite great variances in chronological age. But then, the intelligence quotient purports to measure the ratio of cognitive age to chronological age. This reminds me of the old television

show “Doogie Howser, M.D.” It is debatable, however, whether our society is ready for such differences between societal position and age.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to argue, at least in theory, with an attempt to match people to jobs based upon competency. But we seem to be making little progress in a practical vein. It may be, however, that by implementing structural and procedural improvements à la Blanchard and Jaques, many other enhancements might occur as well. Indeed, to evaluate the prospects of a proposed intervention, one must attempt to project the effects of the change

upon the whole, not just upon a portion of the whole. There is simply too much interaction and interdependency within existing organizations to have any hope of performing a change and avoiding second-, third-, and higher- order ramifications. To understand what may happen, what is happening, and what will happen, we need a more comprehensive understanding of people and management. Thus, I applaud the innovative and valuable contributions of both Blanchard and Jaques toward a “unified field theory of management.”



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